

"But They Won't Let You Read!": A Case Study of an Urban Middle School Male's Response to School Reading

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study presents the perceptions of Derrick, a Black urban adolescent male who enjoys reading but believes that inconsistent school discourses hinder his success and enjoyment as a reader. Findings show that Derrick's purposeful work while reading was limited and misunderstood because, among other factors, there was a pervasive effect of test-driven reform. I argue that his critique of formal reading instruction reveals that even progressive approaches to education are not immune to the discursive power of the accountability and standardization movement, and that resultantly, the active and avid reading engagement of this Black adolescent male was ultimately neglected, inhibited, and dismissed.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a decade of rigorous research revealing the shortcomings and unrealized promises in the current era of educational reform, national policies and popular discourse continue to promote an agenda of accountability and standardization for literacy education (Granger, 2008; Luke, 2012). Research has consistently shown that the return to instruction that focuses on phonics and basic reading comprehension skills, promoted largely through high-stakes testing and commercialized curricula, has resulted in a nationwide narrowing of rigorous objectives, robust instruction, and meaningful experiences with texts in schools, especially for students who are often disadvantaged in educational systems (e.g., Comber, 2012; Cummins, 2007; Fecho, Coombs, & McAuley, 2012; Pearson, 2007; Zacher Pandya, 2011). Additionally, scholars have long criticized the way high-stakes testing constrains teachers' professional knowledge and abilities, ultimately undermining their capacity to provide truly engaging, challenging, and effective instruction (e.g., Afflerbach, 2005; Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004). Policymakers' and public leaders' continued dismissal of this significant and telling body of research has also interfered with the progress of K-12 students who experience difficulties with reading—an ironic, but not surprising outcome of what this reform movement was meant to address.

The effect is problematic, not just for the "struggling readers" for whom the policies had been intended, but also for those who genuinely enjoy engaging with texts. In this article, I present the case of Derrick (all names of people and places are pseudonyms), a 12-year-old male whose avid interests in reading defied many

stereotypes and assumptions about low-income Black adolescent males and their perceived struggles in school. This case study shows that Derrick displays many of the behaviors of a voracious reader. To City School, the ethnically and socioeconomically diverse urban public middle school he attends, Derrick brings the latest novel he is reading in his English Language Arts (ELA) class during independent reading time, and when he arrives in class, he settles down to read while the rest of the class trickles into the room. Sometimes, he discusses the book with peers when they enter the room. Other times, he animatedly tells me or his teacher, Charles, about the novel and then about other books or magazines he is either reading simultaneously or hopes to read next. At home, Derrick carries books and magazines around as well and bears the lighthearted teasing and proud compliments from family and friends that he is "*always reading*."

Yet Derrick feels there are times when he can't read—at least, not in ways that he enjoys or that make sense to him—and those moments still occur within school, despite his many observable enthusiastic interactions with print texts there. Derrick enjoys reading, but he is also starting to voice concerns, dissent, disinterest, and rejection of school reading instruction. As a member of a working-poor family and living in a neighborhood that commonly sees its share of crime and violence, he is like many urban male students who are "learning to read among turmoil" (Tatum, 2005, p. 15). Tatum (2005) explains that under such daily circumstances, "many poor black males are too preoccupied with thoughts of their own mortality and day-to-day energy required to survive to think about literacy as a bridge to the future" (p. 14). Derrick presents a different case: a Black adolescent male who wants to read, who sees his formal education at school as valuable, but who feels that challenges to his growth, enjoyment, and success as a reader ironically stem from inside school walls, not outside them.

In the professional literature, through popular media outlets, and at public forums, some educators have denounced the restrictive impact of federal policy on students' literacy learning. And yet, the restrictive values and assumptions behind those policies have even found their way into what many might call progressive approaches to literacy learning. Furthermore, relatively little voice has been given to those whose experiences in schools are most at stake—the students themselves. In this article, I aim to further the discussion of the complexities of: (1) the normative discourse about poor and working-class male students of color and their perceived reasons for struggling with reading in school, and (2) the current and pervasive policy push for accountability, standardization, and high-stakes testing in reading.

Although I acknowledge the multiple and robust definitions of reading that consider diverse kinds of texts, signifiers, and modalities, and are embraced by other literacy educators, for the purpose of this article, I first define reading as City School does in order to underscore the limitations within that definition and the school's enactment of it. That is, reading at City School is focused primarily on engagement with printed texts—such as novels, poems, short stories, and magazine and newspaper articles—that use writing as the primary symbol code for meaning. Despite the school's conventional view of reading, I draw on Freire's (1970) insistence that interactions with printed texts always involve reading both the word and the world. Derrick was doing just that as he responded to his experiences as a reader in an official school setting, but the narrow definition of reading propagated by policymakers and schools restricted how others viewed his responses to reading instruction.

My argument, therefore, is twofold. I stand with literacy educators and scholars (e.g., Comber, 2012; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Luke, 2012; Pearson, 2007) who assert that the limited views of reading conveyed in many educational policies and practices, such as those operating at City School, also limit the perspective of some well-meaning practitioners. This educational ethos may create barriers to meaningful reading experiences in school for students, even with teachers and schools that adopt progressive stances toward reading instruction. Moreover, I contend that the extensive impact of a test-driven school climate neglects, inhibits, and dismisses the active and avid reading engagement of some Black adolescent males. By sharing Derrick's voice, I hope to provide more reason that the current era of educational reform must change course.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Complexity of Black Adolescent Males as Readers in School

One must be careful not to view Black adolescent males monolithically, but to understand how the confluence of gender with race and class discourses also guides how they approach literacy and achieve academically. Kunjufu (1982) and Noguera (2003) have pointed to the numerous cultural and social forces, as well as a lack of cultural and social capital, that often hinder Black male youths' academic success. The historic and sociopolitical contexts of schools add other layers. Male students' interests are not often considered in the selection and provision of classroom materials, especially books (Millard, 1997; Taylor, 2004). Researchers have also contended that many working-class students' ways with language and literacy often clash with dominant school discourses that uphold middle-class ways of reading, writing, and communicating, positioning them as outsiders in the reading classroom (Finn, 1999; Heath, 1983). To combat such deficit views and disconnections with school, Brozo, Walter, and Placker (2002) and Hansen and Zambo (2010) argue that stories with positive male archetypes help boys engage with texts more deeply and expressively. Tatum (1999, 2005) argues that Black adolescent males continue to need Black

adult male role models who pursue reading as a genuine interest. Others advocate for culturally relevant and responsive teaching and classroom experiences (Au, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1992); the relevance of drawing from African American linguistic and rhetorical traditions (Fisher, 2007; Lee, 1993); and the promise of popular culture, hip-hop, and rap music, to become a bridge for learning other genre (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004).

Such possibilities, however, remain overshadowed by the broader political ethos. While the discourse of accountability and standardization has cut across class- and race-based educational contexts, the degree of influence is different for different student populations. Schools and districts with more affluent student populations can afford to eschew some federal mandates because of their typically passing scores on standardized measures, but schools with large numbers of low-income students of color remain the focal point of such policies. Haddix (2009/2010) writes that the "overrepresentation of statistical and policy reports that place African American males and their low academic performance in the center of the frame only serves to further reify notions of failure when we fail to take up or complicate why this dominant discourse exists in the first place" (p. 343). In this regard, Derrick's situation as an adolescent Black male who enjoys and values reading is more precarious, as current reform policies zero in with monolithic understandings of Black male students and compel schools to adopt blanket instructional practices that ignore and may possibly thwart possibilities for students like Derrick.

Students' Experiences with School Reading Instruction

Dutro and Selland (2012) state, "we need to access as many vantage points as possible to better understand what is at stake in test-driven reforms for teachers, schools, the public school system in the United States, and most importantly, for children" (p. 341). The critiques of federal mandates for literacy learning range from an overall lackluster increase in student achievement (Granger, 2008; Luke, 2012) to the pressures to teach commercial reading programs and test preparation (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003), resulting in a diminution of rigor and critical thinking skills and processes in instructional activities (Zacher Pandya, 2011). As the primary beneficiaries of this reform, students' experiences and perspectives provide acute insight into the success and shortcomings of the actual enactment of accountability and standardization policies.

Though few in number, studies that center on student perspectives about current educational reform are compelling. Paris, Roth, and Turner (2000) found that as students progressed through years of schooling, their attitudes toward standardized test taking and school in general grew increasingly more negative. Additionally, their perceptions of self-motivation, self-competence, and self-control became more tied to their achievement on tests, skewing their understanding of what they had actually learned, as well as what they had accomplished overall, in school. Dutro and Selland (2012) found that only students who scored at the proficient level or above spoke positively about high-stakes testing. Other studies corroborate the finding that making student learning and academic

success contingent on high-stakes, standardized assessments leads to students' feelings of boredom, anxiety, pessimism, and cynicism about learning in school (e.g., Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2000). In this article, I add to this critical, but limited research by examining the impact of accountability and standardization movements on one student's overall experiences with reading in school. Given this contextual background, Derrick's case is especially illuminating regarding the disconnection and disillusionment with school that often characterize Black adolescent males, but for reasons that reach beyond the individual school to larger questions about contemporary literacy education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze Derrick's responses to his formal educational experience with reading, I draw upon sociocultural theories of literacy, which highlight the inextricable relationship between the diverse, sociocultural identities and practices of literacy learners and teachers (Gee, 1990, 1996; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). Interactions with texts are not a result of individual practices, but are grounded within social contexts in which readers interact with others, the world around them, and the text itself in order to construct meaning (Duncum, 2004; Freire, 1970; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). In this respect, literacy occurs beyond the confines of a classroom, in all social spaces, for varied purposes, and according to historical and institutional ideologies (Collins, 2000). In this way, various discourses, or culturally authoritative ways of constructing and organizing knowledge (Foucault, 1980) guide our understandings of literacy engagement. Not only are the ways in which we read texts influenced by our individually lived experiences, what we have come to know about the world, and the discourses we use to construct that meaning, they are also reinforced through our interactions with texts. A student's school literacy experiences, then, are rooted in the institution's historically social and cultural practices and are continuously shaped by interactions between student and teacher, student and peers, and student and text.

Furthermore, literacy is also a politically dynamic endeavor, conveying and maintaining particular ideologies that value some ways of constructing meaning from texts and silence others (Gee, 1999; Luke, 2000). School literacy instruction is never neutral, but is dependent on various discourses used in literacy interactions that wield power in the context of the classroom. Thus, reading in school involves drawing on one's individual discourses to negotiate the discourses used in literacy learning within the classroom. My use of the terms *reading* and *literacy* indicates my conception that what we do with texts and how we construct meaning from them are always socially situated, discursively constructed, and politically charged.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative case study stems from a larger ethnographic study on the reading identities of urban poor and working-class middle school students of color (Enriquez, 2009). Case studies call attention to the significance of one's experiences in specific contexts

and under particular circumstances to reveal how meaning is negotiated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). For the case study reported in this article, I sought answers to the following questions: (1) What opportunities did City School offer to Derrick to nurture his skills, interests, and identities as a reader? and (2) How did Derrick experience those opportunities on a daily basis? Focusing on the case of Derrick aligns with my goals to problematize overgeneralizations of low-income Black adolescent males and to consider how the challenges that confront a student are rooted not only in the student but stem from the many, complex layers that construct formal reading education in school.

The Participant

As previously introduced, Derrick was a 12-year-old Black male student in Charles' eighth-grade ELA class. He lived with his mother, older brother, younger sister, grandmother, and cousin in a working-poor neighborhood some distance from the gentrified part of the city where City School was located. Derrick was new to the school at the start of the academic year, while many of his classmates had attended City School since sixth grade. With a generally easygoing personality, Derrick had formed friendships with a few other students in his class. Math was his favorite subject, and it was where he scored his highest grades. Although he had been suspended for three months in second grade for concerns associated with his behavior, this event did not seem to have had a lasting effect. In our conversations, he told me that overall, he enjoyed school and learning.

Context of the Study

City School was located in a former working-class section of a major city in the Northeast that has been undergoing gentrification, as the large industrial school building now sat among quaint coffee shops, hip boutiques, and residential properties renovated from small apartment buildings into expensive brownstone townhouses. However, City School retained an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student population for grades 6–8. Of its approximately 640 students, 50% were Black, 40% were Latino, 2% were Asian, and 8% were White. In addition, 54% of students qualified for free lunch. Like many of his classmates, Derrick commuted to school via public transportation.

Students took reading and writing classes each day, which were often scheduled back-to-back to allow teachers a 75-minute ELA block. The administration endorsed a balanced literacy and workshop model for reading instruction, process-oriented approaches considered fairly progressive in an era of test-driven reform measures. The school employed a prominent, local professional development organization to help teachers implement these approaches, and the school's literacy coach provided daily in-house and in-classroom professional development to support the organization's work with teachers. Within this instructional model, faculty taught curricular units for reading that provided students with an array of strategies for reading and writing in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes, rather than a specific body of literature or set of authors. For example, reading lessons emphasized ways to trace

character development and identify main ideas in narrative texts. Additionally, to ensure that students were appropriately challenged, they were expected to read “just right” books (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) in school, that is, books that matched students’ individually assessed reading levels. ELA teachers used the Fountas and Pinnell (1996) leveling system to determine students’ reading levels at least three times per academic year. In this system, the levels range from A to denote an emergent reading level to Level Z to denote an adult reading level. Metacognition was also highlighted as an important process for students to employ to reflect on their own processes and interests while reading. Rather than teach the content of certain texts, City School’s curriculum focused on teaching readers how to read and respond to a variety of books, poems, stories, and articles.

City School’s students were assessed annually at each grade level with the state’s standardized test in reading. As the test was administered in mid-January, much of the ELA instruction immediately after the school’s winter holiday break concentrated on test prep skills (e.g., writing to answer prompts, analyzing timed reading passages, etc.). During the fall months, however, ELA teachers addressed the tested skills more indirectly and focused on other curricular goals. For example, Charles worked to increase students’ reading stamina throughout the fall, while also teaching genre units on historical fiction novels, poetry, and informational articles. Instruction focused on the state test became less explicit after the test was administered in January.

Compared to many urban schools with high-needs student populations, City School’s curriculum and overarching philosophy of community building seemed refreshing. Students met every day after lunch for an advisory period, designed to bolster the school community by developing more personal relationships between teachers and students and offering a time and place to explicitly discuss the confluence and collision of issues in urban education and adolescence, especially as they affect students’ lives. Moreover, faculty and administrators continuously articulated a goal to overcome popular stereotypes about urban adolescents of color as at-risk or delinquent by working to create a supportive school community and providing balanced literacy instruction.

The situated discursive context of Derrick’s ELA class offered additional possibilities for him to develop his reading skills and interests. The combined identities of Derrick’s teacher, Charles, as an educated Black man who grew up in a working-class family and lived in neighborhood like Derrick’s helped establish him as an effective mentor. Charles accentuated the importance of what he called “authentic reading” and “lifestyle habits,” referring to real-world purposes for engaging with texts and framing lessons with examples of what “real readers” do. He also repeatedly expressed his concern for developing students who would become what he called “independent readers.” In this context, *independent reading* refers to a component of balanced literacy instruction in which students read self-selected texts by themselves for an extended period of time. Prior to independent reading time, teachers often

taught strategies, skills, and behaviors students could draw upon while reading, and followed up with individual students in one-to-one conferences or small group work. As a Black man from a working-class background with a specific interest in teaching disadvantaged students, and as an advocate for progressive, student-centered instruction, Charles worked to position himself as a mentor when it came to reading and writing, seeking to help students cultivate their own interests and purposes for literacy learning and to pay heed to the holistic needs of students as members of a classroom community.

Embracing the motto, “teach the student, not the book,” Charles began the year establishing pedagogical structures that allowed students ample time for independent reading with books and magazines of their own choosing. His instruction helped to situate academic activities within a nonacademic world, lending them salience and emphasizing the benefits of reading in students’ everyday lives. To this end, he relaxed some assignments and conventional disciplinary procedures to help students engage in authentic reading. For example, he rarely required students to sit in their assigned seats while reading unless they were disrupting the work of students around them. Charles admitted he was not a stickler for rules, but that he would enforce them when necessary. Thus, the context of this classroom offered students new possibilities for reading, with regard to both curricular decisions and classroom management. It would seem, then, that this context would have helped Derrick thrive as a reader at school.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data consisted primarily of fieldnotes from classroom observations and individual interviews collected throughout one school year. Observations occurred two to three times each week, from late September through the end of June. Interviews with the student and the classroom teacher occurred twice in the year for approximately 30 minutes each. Supplemental data included audio recordings from interviews, video recordings of classroom activities, school- and student-produced documents, and individual interviews with other school faculty.

Data analysis followed a constant comparative procedure, affording flexibility to generate themes while coding data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999). Each week, I synthesized comparable data into narrative reflections, outlined motifs and concepts, and began formulating my understandings of the data. I also sought opposing and anomalous examples from the data set to challenge my initial interpretations, build a more critical analysis, and ensure that the process would remain inductive, recursive, and reflexive (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Janesick, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Three salient themes emerged, supporting Derrick’s critical stance toward his reading experiences at school: (1) a reflective articulation of the content and types of texts promoted in schools, (2) an emerging cognizance of hidden and alternative values supported through school reading instruction, and (3) a purposeful employment of his own agency to negotiate and make sense of the conflicting messages about reading that surrounded him.

Researcher's Subjectivities and Reflexivity

For this study, I was an observer/participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), which recognizes how my position within the classroom continuously shifted because of the ebb and flow of power within any social context and my multiple subjectivities as an Asian American female from a working-class background, a former middle school ELA teacher and literacy staff developer, and a university researcher. Among students, I became a "tolerated insider" as they learned I was not a City School authority figure but still an adult outside their peer networks. My research with the diverse student population at City School, and especially Derrick, stemmed from my personal and professional interests in challenging the assumptions made about students because of their raced, ethnic, classed, and gendered identities, and in stressing the many variations of students' responses to literacy learning when any combination of those identities are present.

While analyzing data, I also looked to several "critical friends" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) whose perspectives as colleagues and researchers provided an evaluative lens for my interpretations. These critical friends identified assumptions and alternatives regarding my analyses when I shared my preliminary interpretations with them approximately twice a month.

FINDINGS

"I See It as Reading": Differing Definitions of Reading and Readers

When asked about his specific reading interests, Derrick listed an array of genres, authors, and formats for printed texts. He leaned toward fantasy, action, and adventure stories and was a fan of works by Rick Riordan, Darren Shan, and Stephanie Meyer. He also avidly read *anime* and had several Japanese comic books in his backpack to read as he travelled to and from school. Derrick even readily admitted he enjoyed reading romantic poetry, a genre that continues to be socially and culturally "unsuitable for boys" (Grieg & Hughes, 2009), expounding, "I like poetry that comes from the heart. That you can feel the emotions with." He took great pride in his versatility as a reader and in his ability to share and recommend titles to classmates:

When I read, I'm reviewing something. I'm like a trendsetter. Like when I was reading Twilight, my friend said, "Oh, what's that?" I said, "It's a book," and I gave it to him. The next thing you know, everyone's reading it.

Derrick also enjoyed discussing texts with peers and playfully teased others about the books they read. One morning, Derrick and his classmate Arnold began jocularly comparing books in the *Artemis Fowl* series (Colfer, 2001–2012) to the *Cirque du Freak* series (Shan, 2004–2008):

Arnold: *That's your opinion. You say Cirque du Freak is better, and I say in my opinion Artemis Fowl is better.*

Derrick: *I say come over here.*

Arnold: *All right, I will. Hold on. (finishes packing his sweatshirt into his backpack and setting his supplies on his desk, then walks over to Derrick's table) Okay, I'm over here. (Derrick smiles, puts one hand on Arnold's stomach, and gently pushes him away). Yeah, that's what I thought.*

This playful confrontation between classmates underscores the personal interest and value Derrick placed on reading. He therefore perceived himself as a leader among peers when it came to reading and positioned himself in class as a strong reader.

However, Derrick felt he received incongruous messages about reading and expressed his frustrations with trying to both play by the school's rules and pursue his reading interests. Like many adolescents, he lamented that school authorities did not sanction the topics and genres he enjoyed reading. He voiced this opinion almost immediately in my first interview with him:

Derrick: *I like Japanese cartoons and books and—basically, I like Japan. Anything from Japan. Origami, books, graphic novels, comic books, TV shows, everything . . . Almost everything.*

Grace: *Do you get to read any of that in school?*

Derrick: *(shakes head) No. 'Cause they only—'cause really the school only like—the Board of Ed—America so they don't really bring graphic novels in that much. . . . It's like—it's like a comic book, but it's—it's a book version, you know? I see it as reading.*

Here, Derrick communicates awareness that his school privileged certain kinds of texts as worthwhile reading material. When I asked City School's literacy coach, Leslie, about a graphic novel that Derrick had accidentally left in class, she commented, "Yeah, a lot of kids read those for fun." With the phrase "for fun," Leslie drew a distinction between texts students read for academic purposes and those that counted as leisure reading materials. This distinction not only implied that the latter set of texts were not considered valuable beyond entertainment purposes, but also, that such genuine pleasurable interactions were not necessarily expected with the materials officially used for reading instruction. Derrick, on the other hand, did not modulate the kinds of texts he read in school, though he was cognizant that school officials did.

Other observational data indicate that City School adhered to a traditional institutional definition of text as passages of written language that were most often traditional novels (Lankshear & Snyder, 2000). Though classes engaged in independent reading, and students were given a good deal of choice of titles for independent reading, the overwhelming majority of texts in the school and ELA classroom libraries were novels and short story and poetry collections. City School did not particularly stress the reading of canonical texts, and like Charles, many teachers in the school advocated for the reading of young adult novels among students, citing their literary quality and level of interest to students. Yet instruction did not systematically include the reading of magazines, graphic novels,

comic books, and other published materials, even through they were sometimes available for students. Despite its progressive instruction of reading strategies over prescribed texts, curricular units of study still centered on conventional genres (e.g., historical fiction, nonfiction, poetry), literary elements (e.g., character, setting), and thematic inquiries (e.g., coming-of-age stories). Text was defined more broadly in the situated context of Derrick's ELA classroom, where students occasionally enjoyed the option of reading magazines and graphic novels during independent reading time and once or twice viewing a film for discussion. However, those moments were rarely tied to the school's reading curriculum.

This privileging of mainstream definitions of text and reading was influenced by the school's work with a particular professional development partner, but it was also shaped by a larger concern in education about student achievement. Flood, Lapp, and Bayles-Martin (2000) note four levels of defining text in schools: exposure to the classics (level one), beyond the classics (level two), teaching with visual media (level three), and production of visual media and alternative texts (level four). Levels one and two comprise much of the content of standardized tests, while levels three and four can be challenging for schools to implement, let alone assess in a pragmatic standardized way. The opportunities in Derrick's classroom extended the notion of text to levels two and three, as Charles encouraged students to pursue authentic reading experiences during class time. However, when officially assessing students as readers, neither he nor the other ELA teachers at City School drew upon their engagement with magazines, film, or texts considered subpar to novels and poetry.

In addition to Derrick's definition of text, his practices as a reader often clashed with an expectation, promoted by national attentiveness to standardization and competition, about how students should engage in reading. Derrick was often reading a variety of books simultaneously and always knew which title he would pick up next. Once, he even had two titles he wanted to read and was simply waiting for Charles to procure them for the classroom library. What many might call enthusiastic reading, though, was viewed as hasty and perfunctory in school. According to school assessments, Derrick was reading at Guided Reading level W at the beginning of the year and then at level Z, which is appropriate for eighth graders (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), when reassessed during the winter break and again at the end of the year. However, Charles, Leslie, and other faculty reprimanded him at times for not following along with class lessons or the text that the class was reading and discussing together. Due to his varying inattention to whole class texts, he sometimes completed reading assignments incorrectly or answered comprehension questions inaccurately, influencing how teachers identified him as a reader. Despite crowning Derrick as "*the king of literacy at home*," Charles also described him as "*a chronic outpacer*" who constantly switched books during classroom independent reading time. The conflict between the requirements of the classroom and the intense personal interest in reading self-selected texts presented a challenge to both Derrick and his teachers.

Teachers at City School often cited benchmark goals for reading rate to motivate their students that focused on both the number of pages and number of books completed in a given amount of time. For example, when Charles and Leslie asked students to record the number of pages they read each day in their reading logs, one student asked, "*We can't just write [the number of pages] on Post-its?*" Charles answered, "*A log is more official*" and "*An eighth grader in [this city] should read 30 pages a day.*" Though Derrick easily met that goal, he did not regularly do so one book at a time, thus characterizing his reading practices as distracted. In actuality, Derrick's log indicated he had sometimes read more books than his classmates, just not in the linear fashion that was formally taught to students.

Leslie also relayed a similar message to Derrick's class when she taught a lesson about setting goals for reading, by emphasizing the importance of quantifiable reading progress:

The kids at the best schools in the city are reading three hours a day, and that's not just during independent reading. My own reading goal was to go up five to 10 pages every day or night for three days.

It can be argued that this view is rooted in an effort to combat the negative outcomes of a phenomenon described by Stanovich (1986) as "Matthew effects," where students with more opportunities, exposure, and time spent reading will experience greater gains in their reading growth, while those with fewer opportunities, exposure, and time spent reading will continue to fall further behind their more fortunate peers. Leslie's words of encouragement had the risk of failure, however, as they emphasized pace and contest more than genuine meaning making and engagement. In other words, without adequate explanation to students about why and how increasing the amount of time they spend reading could ultimately benefit them, what was stressed is the measurement and management of time and behavior. That these messages were conveyed in daily instruction and not just during test prep season demonstrates how deep into the school's instructional milieu the nation's preoccupation with testing and accountability had penetrated.

This tension between institutional beliefs and Derrick's personal values about reading resulted in contrasting views of Derrick as a reader, especially at school. Because Derrick's behaviors with texts did not always comply with what teachers expected, he seemed to confuse and frustrate teachers. In these examples, his choices about which texts to read and when to read them were purposeful and meaningful, albeit off-task. But however authentic or engrossing his interactions with those texts, they still carried less weight than reading novels within the school. Nor did his ability to read several novels at once convince many faculty of his reading progress. Along with Derrick's subpar performance on assignments related to whole-class texts, his determination to read diverse kinds of texts or to read them according to his own timeline did not appear academically beneficial to school authorities.

"They Don't Want Us to Read": Mixed Messages about the Value of Reading

Derrick traced the development of his enjoyment of reading to a trying time in his elementary school education. In second grade, he was frequently reprimanded for disruptive and uncooperative behavior and was transferred to another second grade class:

So I got switched in one class for about a day. The next day, the teacher didn't want me back in his class, so I had to sit in the guidance counselor's on in-house suspension for three months, and I was just reading. I have bad pronunciation because of that day 'cause I was not in class learning how to pronounce words. But I learned how to read. Like [if] I was to say a word in my head, I would know what to say, but saying it out loud, my tongue get tied.

In this interview, I grasped Derrick's budding sense of ulterior purposes for formal classroom-based reading instruction and his understanding that the act of reading and his engagement with printed texts did not necessarily depend on discrete skills or an official curriculum or pedagogy. Rather, his purposes for reading were deeply personal.

In his ELA class, Derrick also noticed and critiqued inconsistent messages about reading. In September, Derrick described the class as *"the best class I actually read in,"* and he reliably volunteered his vast knowledge about books, magazines, and authors with teachers, classmates, and myself. However, he was especially disgruntled after taking the state test for his grade level:

Derrick: *One minute [teachers] want you to read, the next minute you can't read. Like [Charles's] class. Before—before the test he wanted to stress about reading. Reading, reading, reading. Now that we did the test, he want to stop us from reading. Like, they always do that. And then they expect us to have that kind of stamina. Like if the test was to pop up again, he'd be like, "What? What happened to your stamina? Ya'll used to always read." He make us read twenty, ten minutes a day now. Before, we used to read the entire—for the whole period.*

Grace: *Why do you think that is?*

Derrick: *'Cause he wants to focus—focus on writing [workshop].*

Here, Derrick implicitly identifies three reasons for developing students' reading stamina that are promoted in many schools: to prepare for the amount of reading required on standardized tests; to build capacity for sustaining interest in a text; and to promote reading volume (Stanovich, 1986). Months before the state test, I observed a "whole period" of reading, during which students were encouraged to read their self-selected novels. Charles praised the class for their accomplishment, and students asked if they could spend more class sessions the same way. Derrick's exasperation during this interview stemmed not just from a regulation of his actions and time, but also a ready downplaying of reading in light of other curricular demands. Moreover, his frustration reveals a lack of clarification and explanation about the

different purposes for reading, whose conflation seemed genuinely confusing to him.

Derrick also noted that reading in school was not esteemed universally or equally among his teachers. Although many teachers declared it was a useful experience for students to engage in, not all considered it an acceptable way for students to spend time in their classes, especially content area teachers who legitimately needed students to learn the content they were responsible for teaching and to meet the achievement goals for the subject matter. In addition, it confused Derrick to have a practice that had been encouraged in elementary school deemed unacceptable at this level.

Derrick: *So in math class, I'm always the first one finished in like five minutes. So I start to read. [The teacher] starts to yell at me: "Pay attention." I say, "I'm done." She's like, "Oh, well, let me check it." I got a 100. She gave us—she gave us a math quiz . . . On the multiple choice, I got a 100 and I got five other—four other questions I got wrong 'cause I didn't do it. So she going over the multiple choice part, 'cause everybody messed up on it. And she said, "Derrick, pay attention." And I was like, "I got a 100 on it." She said, "Oh. Just sit there." I started to read. "Oh what you doing?" I said, "You gonna tell me—you said, 'Stop working.'" She said, "Well, still, you can't read. Pay attention. This is my math class." They always saying when you finish your work, a good thing to stop you acting up is reading. But they won't let you read!*

Grace: *Because it's math?*

Derrick: *Not even in math. In advisory . . . [The advisory teacher] won't let you read. My advisory teacher get mad at me.*

Grace: *And so . . . how do you feel about that?*

Derrick: *I said, "They don't want us to read in one class, and they don't want us reading in the other class." . . . I don't know. We all had to sit in one class in elementary school. And the one teacher said, "When you finish with your work, you either put your head down or read." So I grew up reading after I finish my work. But [here] they won't let you read, so like, they should let you read in other classes if that's the case.*

To Derrick, such conflicting directions communicated that many teachers upheld a pretense about the importance of time that was spent reading at school. Though that significance seemed a mantra for fostering students' reading achievement, what Derrick experienced signifies a tension teachers felt between accountability pressures and other—perhaps sometimes more personal—goals for teaching. Research shows that, while a climate of high-stakes testing has noticeable impact on teachers' classroom practices, it is not the only factor that shapes what teachers do (e.g., Cimbricz, 2002; Marchant, 2004). For example, Derrick's math teacher was protective of students' time and attention to her content area, a reasonable

stance in order to ensure that students gained academic knowledge in math. She may also have been mindful of the influence of testing outcomes that induce concern about students' math achievement. Given Charles' strong beliefs about "real-world purposes" for literacy learning and attending to students' holistic needs, he may have forgone the time and attention he gave to independent reading to ensure that students also had ample learning experiences with writing and other forms of literacy and language arts. Nonetheless, the mixed messages Derrick perceived about the value of time spent reading indicates the expectations and stress teachers felt to both remain true to their professional convictions and responsibilities and to ensure students' achievement on tests.

Furthermore, the comment that students were expected to "put your head down" as an option after completing assignments accentuates concern about classroom management that preoccupies many teachers in high-needs, urban schools. Derrick not only perceived the difference between the two options the teacher offered him, but he also understood that reading was the more personally productive of the two. In fact, by reiterating that his teachers were "always saying when you finish your work, a good thing to stop you acting up is reading" and then exclaiming, "But they won't let you read," he highlighted not just the irony of the situation, but the counter productivity of such a statement. By telling students to put their heads down, teachers may gain control over classroom behavior, but at the expense of their professional goals to support students' growth as readers and engaged learners.

"You Can't Just Suddenly Stop": Defining and Identifying Himself as a Reader

From a young age, reading was something Derrick claimed as his own. Additionally, reading seemed to serve as a coping and calming mechanism:

[Growing up], I always had to hear my mother yell and all—my grandma and my brothers—so I learned how to read. I learned how to do everything by myself. I really didn't have anybody to teach me . . . I don't like being around aggressive environments, 'cause then I start to go how I was when I was little . . . My counselor taught me how to control my anger. It's just that being in that kind of environment, and I would just wig out. I would hit the first thing when walking in. [Now] I would walk out into the hallway or in my room and start to read.

Derrick's strategy of turning toward reading allowed him to manage his anger and provided him a form of escape from the tribulations of his daily life whether at school or at home.

This purposeful repositioning of himself as a reader in order to deal with conflict contributed to his perception that reading was a personally valuable and worthy endeavor. Charles' approach to reading instruction, therefore, initially seemed to suit Derrick well. In turn, Charles described Derrick to me as "the king of literacy at home," noting Derrick's commitment to reading beyond his time in class and relating a story to me about encountering Derrick after school one day:

The bus was late. I ran into him at the bus stop, and he had his mad face on . . . And he told me the bus was like twenty minutes late, and he was so mad that he just pulled out a book and started reading. (laughs)

This auspicious acknowledgement of Derrick's reading practices outside of school, however, did not easily match how faculty viewed him within the official institutional space of the classroom. When his genuine interest in reading and readiness to do it any time diverted from teachers' curricular or management plans, they were seen as disruptive or deviant. Again, I do not mean to critique teachers' desire or need to attend to their content instruction. What frustrated Derrick was a lack of clarification or consistency about when self-selected reading was appropriate in school. Thus, Derrick sometimes took matters into his own hands. Frustrated that his ELA class began favoring writing workshop over reading after taking the state test, he explained,

But you can't just suddenly stop something . . . [Charles] just read any book. Like the books we read, we actually get into. That's why I went down to the library [under pretense of finishing his writing assignment] today. 'Cause I wanted to keep reading my books.

Certainly, focusing on writing is a legitimate ELA curricular decision, and Charles' assignment was purposeful and well intentioned. However, students commonly undermined a regulation of reading time by asking to complete writing workshop assignments in the library. Though most returned to class with some evidence of their writing work, many also left and returned with books to read. I also observed Derrick ignore Charles' directions to stop independent reading time and switch focus onto a different literacy activity (e.g., whole class read-aloud, independent writing, test prep) so he could continue reading his own texts. Derrick thus carved out his own time for reading regardless of the official duration of reading time in school. He did not let inconsistent expectations or his frustrations with such mixed messages dissuade him from reading. Nor did he fully accept teachers' decisions to limit time to read in order to attend to other curricular needs. Instead, perhaps to the detriment of his learning academic content, he sometimes subverted the rules, opting to pursue his reading interests and to maintain the value he held in that experience.

DISCUSSION

Derrick's perceptions about the value and practice of reading differed from what he was told and taught at school. While taking pride in reading a variety of textual genres and formats, he felt dissuaded from reading anything other than administration-approved novels, poems, and stories in class, and from reading in ways that made sense to him. Additionally, he recognized some discrepancies between what teachers said and did to promote student reading, within and across classrooms. Derrick attempted to comply with institutional norms and teachers' rules about reading, but he also refused to let them quash his own reading interests and beliefs. He often positioned himself with agency, subverting authorities to

take charge of his own reading growth. Yet, as a result, teachers interpreted that subversion as indicative of social deviance and difficulties with reading. Thus, what Derrick struggled with as a reader was not necessarily the skills assessed on standardized tests and in classroom assignments, but the behaviors around reading he was told to pursue in school, often because of the pressures of test-driven activity that was highlighted at certain times in the academic year.

Like many high-needs urban schools across the nation, City School worked to combat stereotypes about its student population and to attend to social, economic, and cultural factors in students' lives that impact their academic experiences. Adopting a balanced literacy and workshop approach was a significant attempt to focus on those goals in reading instruction, as they hinge upon student-centered pedagogy and student self-selection of reading materials. And yet, the regime of accountability, standardization, and high-stakes testing has become so formidable that even those progressive instructional approaches have become suffused with messages and pressure to track student achievement in quantified and competitive ways. At City School, these discourses resulted in teachers conveying mixed messages about what reading involved, especially around what, how, and when to read.

Moreover, City School cited goals of independent reading, but such goals were actually different from and clashed with the construct of authentic reading that Derrick heard daily from teachers. Au, Carroll, and Scheu (1997) raise the crucial distinction between independent reading and *voluntary reading*, explaining that while both activities involve reading silently and individually, only the latter describes what people do for recreation or genuine interest:

Voluntary reading occurs when people read because they want to enjoy the experience of reading, adopting what Rosenblatt (1978) calls the aesthetic stance. . . . Voluntary reading, an important part of ownership of literacy is a habit that can bring students pleasure throughout their lives. Teachers can do much to encourage voluntary reading, including reading aloud, sharing their own literacy with students, and giving book talks. (p. 158)

Conversely, independent reading was an instructional feature in City School's model of balanced literacy. Given this distinction, Charles seemingly intended to boost *voluntary reading* with his talk of authentic reading, but the school's practice of independent reading did not fully serve those intentions. Rather, the conflation of terms offered students potentially contrasting messages about which reading performances were ultimately desirable (i.e., read of your own volition, but make sure to do it during designated class time). Additionally, teachers of other disciplines had justifiable reasons to restrict students' reading of self-selected texts in their classrooms. Some may have even seemed to confuse the goals and purposes of reading, perhaps seeing the pleasurable aspect of voluntary reading as too leisurely and not academically oriented enough. The muddling of terms and values accentuates the power of institutional norms, the impact of current federal policies, and

the multiple conflicting discourses influencing Derrick's school reading experiences all positioned him to be a weaker reader than he was outside of school.

When the discourse about reading in schools is inconsistent, students can grow acutely aware of any insincerity or even hypocrisy in the promise of formal education. Stuckey (1990) argues that educational discourses extol the benefits of literacy learning and then systematically identify and exclude students who do not perform reading according to school dictates and national measures. This agenda, while often subconscious on the part of school faculty and administrators, is also an undercurrent of federal policies and targets especially poor and working-class students of color. As a result, many students who regularly engage meaningfully with texts are erroneously viewed as struggling (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006) and quickly learn that the promised benefits of a formal education are deceptive (Finn, 1999).

Furthermore, Derrick's perceptions support findings that the constant scrutiny of low-income Black males' school literacy learning and an overrepresentation of their achievement profiles in federal reports and mandates (Haddix, 2009/2010) still centers on concerns about social behavior (Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010). Even Charles's messages about reading were embroiled with issues of classroom management and achievement measures within the school context. Higgins and Moule (2009) found that when faced with the real, day-to-day complexities of teaching low-income African American urban students, teachers believed that more teacher-directed, authoritarian approaches to classroom management communicated genuine care for students' growth. In fact, Higgins and Moule (2009) found that many teachers combined these approaches with high expectations for academic achievement. And yet, as Derrick's case exemplifies, when the messages students receive about social behavior and regulated time conflict with messages about expectations for engaging in reading or learning, one wonders about the effectiveness of such messages.

My point is not to champion reading over other content knowledge, but to reconsider how our messages and views about reading conflate and conflict with one another in our national discourse, across teachers, and within our own classroom walls. Schools have a responsibility to teach academic knowledge and are under pressure to meet state standards and curricular goals and to make adequate yearly progress. High-needs urban schools continue to fall under the surveilling gaze of policymakers, making the stakes for them truly high. This constant scrutiny affected even more progressive teachers, like Charles, and limited teachers' perspectives about reading.

Derrick's concept of reading, his interest in a variety of texts, and his determination to read despite teachers' regulations prompt serious consideration about what we as teachers, administrators, and policymakers mean when we profess a desire for students to read. While the school aimed to prepare its diverse, urban student population with a mindset to achieve academically, hegemonic discourses about test-driven reform and social control were embedded

throughout its daily operations. By focusing on the behaviors and processes of reading in ways that emphasized time and pace over meaningful engagement, reading lessons inadvertently worked to regulate students' interactions with printed texts, with teachers positioned to surveil students' reading performances and help schools make normalizing judgments about what students could or could not do while reading (Foucault, 1995; Gallagher, 1999).

Derrick's reading of texts he found personally engrossing, when and how he wanted, was a way to resist and thwart the disciplinary regime operating in some schools, even those with progressive curricula and well intentioned teachers who genuinely care about students' academic growth. In doing so, Derrick was not acting in ways that were purely defiant or rebellious, as popular adolescent development discourses might insist. Rather, his performances were acts of agency—though not always conscious or voluntary—that enabled him to pursue his own interests. These goals, combined with the relegation of these texts as unsanctioned, prevented school authorities and other students from seeing his engagement with such texts as worthwhile reading performances.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In an educational climate dominated by constrictive policies and understandings about literacy learning, what can we do to help readers like Derrick sustain his appetite for reading while ensuring the growth of his knowledge and skills? A starting point is to establish that the effort is not just the responsibility of ELA teachers; rather, a schoolwide effort is imperative. Teachers must honestly and collectively reflect on such questions as: What values about when and what to read are communicated in our classrooms? Are they consistent with what is communicated throughout the year and throughout our school? Perhaps before initiating a reading experience, one might ask whether its primary purpose is to nurture students' reading development, to manage classroom behavior, or to improve standardized test scores. Meeting with teachers at other grade levels and in other content areas to discuss expectations about student reading would also help to identify any discrepancies that exist across the faculty and work to establish shared goals and consistent messages across classrooms.

Another approach is to put one's own estimations aside and investigate how individual students perceive themselves as readers. If any of those identities conflict with teachers' perceptions, inquiring into why such discrepancies exist would be a next step. These kinds of investigations are what Kamler and Comber (2005) mean by insisting that teachers must engage in "turn-around pedagogies" that position students as capable and purposeful rather than incapable and resistant. To do this, teachers must conduct careful, continual, and open-minded observations of their students to better determine what they are doing with texts, why they are doing so, and how to build upon their purpose and momentum to better support them as readers. We must take a moment to observe what kinds of texts our students enjoy reading on their own time and consider how we support their reading of a variety of genres and

formats, even if they are not officially included in the school curriculum. For example, incorporating more picture books into reading instruction could support their reading of graphic novels, as both text types require students to attend to visual and print details to construct meaning. Though Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, and Frey's (2011/2012) survey of teachers' perspectives and use of graphic novels in the classroom reports that the texts are still not largely utilized as primary classroom materials for reading instruction, teachers generally agreed that reading graphic novels was of high interest among students and held worthwhile possibilities for supplementing students' reading instruction.

Researchers, administrators, teachers, and community members must also continue sharing counterstories like Derrick's, and to ensure they represent the diverse range of stakeholders affected by federal education policy (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Granger, 2008). This means continuing to bring the voices of students to the fore, since their interests are what reform efforts purport to honor, and to spotlight not just what they experience in reading instruction during testing season but also on a daily basis, across the school year, and across grades. Another step may be to continue constructing powerful examples of counterpraxis that document the tremendous improvement in outcomes at schools that tenaciously commit to educational goals beyond standardized achievement scores (e.g., Fecho, Coombs, & McAuley, 2012; Luke, 2012). These are not easy feats, but helping to change a political milieu that restricts students' reading growth more than it assists means guaranteeing that students have the opportunity to learn to read the world along with the word (Freire, 1970).

As schools shift toward implementing the *Common Core State Standards* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), these recommendations and considerations are vital for ensuring clear and robust understanding of the role of reading and of texts. Derrick's example serves as a crucial reminder that the meaning and value of reading is not just in the text, but also in the experience of it, and he articulates an urgent need for schools to align their practices with that understanding. How we as educators shape opportunities for reading, and how we respond to students' responses to those opportunities communicates the actual value we place on reading. Thus, we should not be surprised that students can discern the discrepancies, scoff at the irony of our ways, and critique us. Without clear, consistent expectations and guidelines, we may be setting up students to adopt behaviors and approaches with texts that conflict with our real hopes for them as learners and readers.

Derrick's protests underscore the pervasiveness of test-driven reform and a misunderstanding of students' abilities as readers. Yet they also affirm the resilience and agency many low-income urban adolescent males of color display regarding their own literacy education. Derrick's determination to pursue his interests in reading, amid the sometimes contradictory and confusing communication surrounding him, is heartening, but I think it would be preferable for students to flourish with our help, not despite our most well-meaning efforts.

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